

Turning the tables on Lyndon LaRouche

CHIP BERLET & REENA BERNARDS

Illinois Democrats, outraged that supporters of right-wing political guru Lyndon LaRouche have "infiltrated" their party and grabbed two primary slots, might find solace in knowing that once, not long ago, the tables were turned.

In 1976 the LaRouche candidate for mayor of Charlotte, N.C., was not really a LaRouche candidate at all. He was Mark Englander, member of an anti-war collective called the Red Hornets that took special glee in disrupting the LaRouche organization.

Back then, LaRouche's method of intervening in elections was to run his candidates not as Democrats but on his own party's ticket. LaRouche himself was the U.S. Labor Party's candidate for president in 1976. By 1980, LaRouche had changed tactics -- the U.S. Labor Party had disappeared and LaRouchians were now filing to enter Democratic Party primaries, as in Illinois this year.

Englander posed as a LaRouche enthusiast and managed to get slated on the U.S. Labor party ticket in Charlotte. Adopting the mind-zapping tactics popularized by Abbie Hoffman's Yippies, Englander's Red Hornet friends then attended campaign rallies wearing "Stoned Zombies for LaRouche" T-shirts emblazoned with the likeness of a wild-eyed LaRouche eating a carrot in a vaguely sexually suggestive way.

"The election was all fun and games as far as we were concerned," remembers Englander, who now lives in Hinsdale, Ill. "Our campaign platform included a call for installing pianos on city buses." Englander, who faced an

entrenched incumbent who owned a chain of department stores, said, "We wanted to change his stores into habitats for wild animals. We received a tremendous amount of publicity, but actually, it really was the first time there was any news in that race."

"They were hilarious," recalls Doug Marlette, political cartoonist for the Charlotte Observer, "and they really infuriated the LaRouchies. That was the most effective method of dealing with the LaRouchies I've ever seen."

Marvin Sparrow, a Red Hornets leader at the time, remembers that he and other members of his group went to the Charlotte election board and changed their party registration to the U.S. Labor Party. At the time, the U.S. Labor Party had only eight registered voters in Charlotte.

"The LaRouchies saw their registrations jump in one week and probably thought their political message was really finding fertile ground," says Sparrow.

Englander paid a filing fee to register as a primary contender for the Labor Party mayoral candidate slot and then quietly marshalled his secret electorate. Englander won the primary over an orthodox LaRouchian named Stanley Ezrol by the lopsided margin of 29 votes to 18.

Like Illinois' Democrats in 1986, Charlotte's LaRouchians were stunned. Englander's true colors became immediately apparent, and the U.S. Labor Party -- in exactly the manner that Adlai Stevenson has lately been contemplating -- went to court to try and get Englander thrown off the ballot.

A Superior Court judge dismissed the challenge.

Sparrow said that from the beginning, "the purpose of our campaign was to ridicule the U.S. Labor Party. We wanted to show that the party was not a serious one, that they were crazy."

When a campaign forum happened to fall on Halloween night, "let's just say I was the only candidate to show up in costume," says Englander. A local television station felt obliged to invite Englander to a televised political debate. During it, Englander conspicuously consumed a banana. The Red Hornets issued a campaign poster with Englander appearing bare-chested.

True LaRouche followers lashed back by deriding them as "stoned Zombies," and "that's how we first got the idea for the T-shirts," says Sparrow with a laugh.

At the close of the bizarre campaign, Englander received 916 votes in the general election, a mere 19,000 away from victory. LaRouche's people went back to court, suing every Red Hornet who, in their view, had falsely registered as a U.S. Labor Party member.

Again, the LaRouchians' case was thrown out of court. Even if the Red Hornets did exactly what they were accused of doing, ruled a federal judge, "this would not constitute an unlawful conspiracy but would simply be political action which must be protected."

The Charlotte Observer commented, in language that today might bring a tear to the eye of an Illinois Democrat: "A successful politician in this country has to persuade people of his worth. By the evidence of the ballot box, Stanley Erzol didn't succeed. That may be embarrassing to him, but it doesn't mean that the man who defeated him broke the law."

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Live from the Senate

Sen. Albert Gore, a Democrat from Tennessee, was amused. He said television had shown us the Titanic on the bottom of the sea and Halley's comet deep in space, and now it actually was going to show us the United States Senate.

Sen. Russell Long, a Democrat of Louisiana, was horrified. He said television in the Senate meant that statesmanship would yield to showmanship. He added that statesmanship already was pretty scarce, come to think of it.

Sen. J. Bennett Johnston, another Democrat from Louisiana, also was pessimistic. He said a filibuster in the Senate was "a messy, untidy spectacle to watch," and he was afraid the citizens would not understand that the spectacle could be important to their freedoms.

Sen. John Stennis, a Democrat from Mississippi, was resigned to the new era. He said, "Let 'em see it all, the way we're carrying on here."

The senators voted, 67 to 21, to televise their sessions from gavel to gavel on a trial basis from June 1 to July 15. C-SPAN, the cable network that has been televising the House of Representatives since 1979, will carry the Senate on a second channel. So, roughly a third of a century after television connected people and politics directly, Congress joins the hookup.

It is more than a coincidence that the senators quoted above are all Southern Democrats. The power of parties, regions, generations and individuals all wax and wane in the Senate, but the Southern Democrats somehow remain the keepers of Senate tradition, of institutional continuity.

Successive Republican leaders, Howard Baker of Tennessee and Bob Dole of Kansas, were instrumental in bringing television to the Senate. The recent conversion of Robert Byrd of West Virginia, the Democratic leader, was crucial. But television was not approved until there was significant sentiment for it among the Southerners.